

*Final Report for:*

## BEARSKIN NECK PLANNING STUDY



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*Submitted to:*  
TOWN OF ROCKPORT

*Submitted by:*  
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## INTRODUCTION

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Rockport is a unique and attractive historic town in Cape Ann. English fishermen settled in the Gloucester area as early as 1623, initiating the fishing industry in America. Some of the early settlers were given land grants in the Rockport area and established lumber businesses. Originally called Sandy Bay, the Fifth Parish of Gloucester became incorporated as a separate town in 1840 and adopted the name of Rockport to reflect the character of its main economic activities – fishing and the granite trade.

For over a century, work in the harbor and the quarries attracted both native-born and European immigrant population. Main Street, with its attractive and elegant buildings is a legacy of times when shipping and trade fueled the local economy. In the early 1900s, artists started to visit Rockport during the summer, attracted by its picturesque character and prominent location overlooking the ocean. Bearskin Neck, the outermost tip of the promontory was then occupied by fishing shacks that fishermen used as lodging and storage space for traps, nets, and other equipment. Some of these shacks and the spectacular views of the ocean became the subject of paintings, and by 1925, an artist's colony had evolved in Bearskin Neck and its immediate surroundings.

Artists brought to Rockport cultural life, seasonal activities, and national recognition. Tourists started to arrive attracted by the picturesque images shown in paintings and postcards. Today, a variety of art galleries, gift-shops, and food establishments line Main Street and Bearskin Neck Road, adding their colorful variety to the Town's historic character and the beauty of the natural landscape to generate one of Cape Ann's most valued town settings.

### PURPOSE OF THIS STUDY

The very same qualities that make Rockport, and Bearskin Neck in particular, so attractive to residents, artists, and visitors are in jeopardy due to the widespread popularity and economic appeal of the area. Increasing demand for commercial and residential space on the Neck has led to the construction of new buildings and building additions that are inconsistent with the small scale and village character of the district. Seasonal vehicular traffic and parking constraints also tend to congest the narrow roadways and alleys originally conceived for foot traffic.



The purpose of this study is to review and analyze the set of conditions that make Bearskin Neck a special place, and the key issues that could detract from its value and appeal in the future. A community workshop was held in the fall of 2003 to gather input and ideas from residents and business owners on the values they would like to preserve, and the opportunities available for improvement. Based on the results of the analysis and the workshop, planning recommendations to preserve and enhance the village design character, strengthening growth control mechanisms, and managing change in a positive way are outlined in this report.

This study has been financed through a grant from the Massachusetts Department of Housing and Community Development (DHCD).

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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Rockport is one of the towns most visited by artists and tourists in Cape Ann. Bearskin Neck, in particular, is the main destination of visitors looking for picturesque views of the ocean and attractive village shops. There is also a substantial community of residents and local artists. One of the significant physical qualities of Bearskin Neck is the small scale of its buildings and narrow roads. Most of the original structures were fishermen shacks, built very close to each other. This combination of small scale and proximity conveys a special feeling of being in an old world village. Perhaps this may be the very reason why artists, visitors and residents keep coming and stay.

The purpose of this study is to review and analyze the set of conditions that make Bearskin Neck a special place, and the planning issues that could detract from its value and appeal in the future. A community workshop was held in the fall of 2003 to gather input and ideas from residents and business owners on the values they would like to preserve, and the opportunities available for improvement. Based on the results of the analysis and the workshop, recommendations are proposed to preserve and enhance the village character, and managing change in a positive way.

### *SUMMARY OF FINDINGS*

The following are some of the existing conditions relevant to the purpose of this study:

***Design Character*** - Architecturally speaking, most of the buildings are two- to three-story high, wood frame construction. Design features, colors and materials are typical of traditional New England coastal communities, including the extensive use of cedar shingles, pitched roofs, and dormers.

***Streetscape Character*** - The quality of some storefronts and sidewalk displays combined with the beauty of the natural setting convey a special streetscape quality to Bearskin Neck. Some businesses and residential properties are enhanced with colorful flowers along the front and side yards. However, the overall streetscape character could be enhanced by extending these qualities throughout the area, and improving public spaces.

***Historic Character*** - Four historic districts have been created to preserve and protect the distinctive characteristics of buildings and places significant in the history of Rockport. However, Bearskin Neck has not been included in any of them, even if it is commonly regarded as having a “historic” character. A similar situation applies to Atlantic Avenue, on the eastern edge of the harbor.

***Flood Hazards*** - Bearskin Neck and parts of the downtown are located in a Flood Zone V2, according to maps and regulations of the National Flood Insurance Program administered by the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA). Accordingly, Bearskin Neck is subject to 100-year coastal floods with wave action, which can reach up to 3 to 5 feet high (such as in the Blizzard of 1978). New construction or alterations to existing buildings within this zone may not be eligible for Federal Insurance protection. Also, special use and design provisions apply to buildings at the ground floor to make them stronger, which may limit their potential for renovation and improvement.

***Zoning Provisions*** - The Town's Zoning By-Law designates Bearskin Neck as part of the General District, which also applies to the rest of the downtown. Both Bearskin Neck and the downtown have special qualities in terms of scale and design character that could be lost if some of the uses allowed in the General District were to be located there. For example, uses allowed by Special Permit that require relatively large extensions of land and parking would be disruptive to the village fabric (e.g. apartment buildings, transportation services, indoor theaters, research laboratories, etc.). Similarly, some dimensional requirements such as minimum lot area and front yard setback are not consistent with the existing lot and setback patterns.

#### ***PLANNING ISSUES***

The following are key planning issues and concerns that affect Bearskin Neck and its population:

##### ***Design Character***

- The village character of Bearskin Neck and the pedestrian quality of its roadways may be endangered by development pressures and increasing vehicular traffic.

##### ***Streetscape***

- Streetscape quality is not consistent throughout the area; some places are very attractive and well maintained, others detract from the overall image and appearance.
- The type, placement, and design quality of signs vary significantly throughout the area.
- Overhead utilities and “cobra” type lights detract from the overall quality of the streetscape.

##### ***Historic Character***

- Bearskin Neck is largely unprotected against changes irrespective of historic and contributing qualities.

##### ***Waterfront***

- It is critical for the economic success of Bearskin Neck, and the Town in general, that the Inner Harbor and the Old Harbor remain active as working harbors.
- State regulations that apply to coastal areas ask for the preservation of public access along the water, but do not necessarily regulate the design quality and treatment of those public areas.
- The location of Bearskin Neck in a 100-year Flood Zone with wave action has an impact on the use, design and construction of buildings, and their level of protection under Federal Insurance.

### *Access and Circulation*

- Heavy vehicular traffic during the tourist season poses pedestrian and environmental hazards along Bearskin Neck Road, and spills over into residential areas.

### *Economic Activities*

- The type, quality, and variety of retail on Bearskin Neck have not been consistent through the years; art galleries and restaurants decreased while the number of souvenir shops keeps increasing.
- A significant number of shop owners do not live in Rockport year round; many stores operate only in the summer, which results in a substantial decrease of activities and amenities in the winter.

### *RECOMMENDATIONS*

The following recommendations are proposed as a supplement to current regulations that allow the Town of Rockport to control growth and new development:

- Create a special **Zoning Overlay District** to protect the special character of Bearskin Neck, and review current zoning for the rest of the downtown.
- Include site and building **Design Guidelines and Standards** as part of new zoning requirements, to guide the design of new buildings and renovations.
- Establish a **Design Review Process** as a prerequisite for zoning and building approval under the new overlay district.
- Initiate the process of preparing a **Municipal Harbor Plan** (MHP), which would enable the Town to define allowed uses and activities, economic goals and design standards for new development.
- Seek funding to prepare a **Streetscape Improvement Plan**, setting the basic planning and design directives for future improvements.
- Initiate steps to inventory historic resources and create a **Bearskin Neck Historic District** that will protect the historic and contributing qualities of the village fabric.
- Establish a **Building Improvement Program** to provide financial and technical assistance to businesses and property owners.
- Strengthen **Traffic and Parking Control Measures** by enforcing parking permits.
- Create a **Visitors Center**, and keep up maintenance of public services and facilities.
- Work in conjunction with local owners, businesses and residents to support a local **Business Association**.

## SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

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As previously indicated, one of the most significant qualities of Bearskin Neck is the small scale of its buildings and narrow roads. Most of the original structures were fishermen shacks, located very close to each other. This combination of small scale and proximity conveys a particular feeling of being in an old world village, a hamlet overlooking the ocean. Perhaps this may be the essential quality that keeps attracting artists and visitors to the area year after year.

In summarizing the findings from the review and analysis of existing conditions, it is important to note the design qualities that support the village character, the qualities that identify its streetscape, and the historic significance of the harbor as one of the places where fishing and shipping activities originated in the country. Important consideration should be given to the fact that Bearskin Neck is located in a 100-year Flood Zone. Current zoning regulations, and land ownership patterns also need to be considered in order to understand land use and development opportunities.

### *Locus Map*



### *DESIGN CHARACTER*

Bearskin Neck is interesting in its geography because the “neck” itself is so narrow that in many places it is possible to command views of the water on multiple directions, especially at the tip of the neck. A small fort stood there to protect the town during the War of 1812. Sandy Bay to the north and the Inner Harbor to the south are visible from this point, the harbor filled with recreational and fishing boats protected from wave action by a massive granite breakwater.



Architecturally speaking, most of the buildings located on Bearskin Neck are two- to three-story high, built of wood frame construction. Design features, colors and materials resemble those typical of traditional New England coastal communities, including the extensive use of cedar shingles, pitched roofs, and dormers. The photographs enclosed in this report illustrate some of these qualities.



Bearskin Neck Road is the main road that provides access to the neck and the breakwater. It ends in a cul-de-sac with spectacular panoramic views. The road is lined on both sides by gift shops, art galleries, and a few eating establishments. Residential and storage space is available above the stores. Cafes and restaurants overlooking the harbor have porches, windows or balconies that allow views of the water for seating customers. This area is bustling with pedestrian activity during the tourist season, which runs approximately from late spring to early fall.

Vehicular traffic moves slowly up and down the road, sharing the right of way with people and bicycles. This is another condition reminiscent of an old village that to some extent contributes to the special character of the commercial district. However, there are times when there is too much traffic on the road, and the high volume of vehicles becomes a hazard to pedestrians.

Dock Square, located at the point where Bearskin Neck Road joins the mainland, has traditionally been the place where delivery and transportation activities serving the Neck have been centered. A wooden town pump, and later a cast-iron horse-watering trough were available in the past. Today tourist buses park and wait here in the summer while visitors wander through the narrow streets and alleyways. Sometimes, buses take a long time to drop off and pick up their passengers, which contributes to create traffic congestion at Dock Square and results in a detriment of pedestrian and environmental qualities. Land use in the area surrounding the Old Harbor is mostly residential, and the streets become less traveled. Buildings are attached or located very close to each other. Parking is sometimes enclosed at the ground level of the buildings. The Town has invested in improving the Old Harbor during the last few years as a public resource mostly geared to recreational boating.

Another important natural asset is Front Beach, which attracts visitors, and divers to Rockport during the summer. The beach is not directly accessible from Bearskin Neck, but it is visible from some areas on the Neck, particularly the Old Harbor.



### *STREETSCAPE CHARACTER*

On a good summer day, the quality of some storefronts and art sidewalk displays combined with the beauty of the natural setting make Bearskin Neck especially memorable. Some businesses and residential properties are enhanced with colorful annuals and perennials landscaping along the front and side yards. Peeks of the water between the buildings establish periodic connections between the streetscape environment and the wider natural surroundings.

However, some aspects of the existing streetscape could be improved to extend the positive qualities throughout the area. For example, some buildings and storefronts are vacant or are not well maintained. The quality of design is not consistent in all commercial displays and signs. There are areas that offer opportunities for enhancement and pedestrian amenities, but remain unattended.

There is no separation between pedestrian and vehicular rights of way, which to a large extent contributes to support the village character. However, streetscape improvements

that enhance the pavement treatment of areas reserved for foot traffic and introduce traffic calming measures in areas reserved for vehicles may be desirable. Traffic and parking signs are not consistent in format, size or placement. The presence of overhead utilities detracts from the overall visual quality and aesthetics.

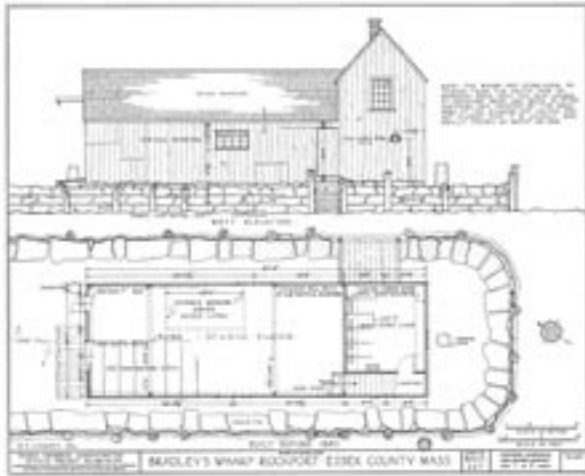


The Town has initiated an effort to provide benches along the seawall in places that could be equipped and landscaped as public open space. This is a great initiative that needs to be supported by all sectors of the community, and expanded.

### *HISTORIC CHARACTER*

Four historic districts have been created under the jurisdiction of the Rockport Historic District Commission, with the general purpose of preserving and protecting the distinctive characteristics of buildings and places significant in the history of Rockport. However, Bearskin Neck has not been included as part of any of them, even if it has been commonly regarded as having a “historic” character. Dock Square and the buildings that surround it are part of the Downtown Historic District, but the boundaries of the district do not extend up Bearskin Neck Road. A similar situation applies to Atlantic Avenue, on the opposite side of the harbor, which is adjacent to the Mount Pleasant South Street Historic District but not included within its limits.

The creation of a Bearskin Neck Historic District to protect and enhance the historic character of the area is a potential planning option to consider in order protecting the village scale and design qualities of its buildings. The district could celebrate the history of



the harbor as a shipping center and economic hub of the community, the beloved Motif #1 building painted and photographed by many artists, and the location of the fort that was built to protect the town during the War of 1812. A historic district designation could also help in promoting sensible reconstruction, controlling the dimensions and appearance of buildings from public vantage points, and promoting the use of traditional construction materials such as natural cedar shingles.

It may be argued that the existing buildings have been changed so much from their original form and purpose that they may not be eligible for inclusion in a National Register. This may well be the case, at least for some of the

structures. However, an inventory of historic resources that includes old buildings identified as being worth preserving may, in addition to determining eligibility, help clarify the extent to which they hold architectural value and their contribution to the overall historic character of the village.

#### *Historic Districts*



#### *FLOOD HAZARDS*

Bearskin Neck and parts of the downtown are located in a Flood Zone V2, according to maps and regulations of the National Flood Insurance Program administered by the Federal Emergency Management Agency. Based on this designation, Bearskin Neck is subject to 100-year coastal floods with wave action, and base flood elevations ranging from 16 to

### *Flood Zone Map*



18 feet including the effects of wave action. In the case of Rockport, the base flood elevation is measured relative to a Reference Mark located at the intersection of Broadway and Mount Pleasant Street, which registers an elevation of 13.45 feet according to the National Geodetic Vertical Datum of 1929 (NGVD). In other words, there have been floods with waves approximately 3 to 5 feet high above the reference mark affecting Bearskin Neck within statistical periods of 100 years. The Blizzard of 1978 is the most memorable one in recent history. New construction or significant alterations to existing buildings within this zone may not be eligible for Federal Insurance protection. Also, special use and design provisions apply to buildings at the ground floor in order to make them safe and strong to resist wave action. These requirements may pose limitations to the potential for renovation and upgrading of existing buildings.

The State Department of Environmental Protection is currently in the process of reviewing and rewriting flood zone limits and tide banks determination along the coast, based on recent and more accurate data. There may be an opportunity for the Town to participate in the process of confirming or revising some of the flood zone parameters that apply to Bearskin Neck depending on the results of that review.

### *ZONING PROVISIONS*

The Town's Zoning By-Law designates Bearskin Neck as part of the General District, which also applies to the downtown. The list of allowed uses in the General District is very extensive, which is appropriate for most downtown areas. However, Bearskin Neck has special qualities in terms of scale and design character that could be lost if some of the uses allowed by the General District were to be located here. For example, some of the uses allowed by Special Permit require relatively large extensions of land and parking areas that would be disruptive to the rest of the village fabric (e.g. apartment buildings, transportation services,



### *Zoning Map*



indoor theaters, research laboratories, etc.). Similarly, some dimensional requirements such as minimum lot area and front yard setback are not consistent with the existing lot area and setback patterns.

Another provision that could represent a potential threat to the protection of the existing village character on Bearskin Neck is the discontinuance clause. This clause establishes that any nonconforming building or structure that is not used for a period of two years will be deemed abandoned, and its nonconforming character will be extinguished. Since most of the existing buildings are nonconforming, this provision could hamper efforts to preserve the existing character of old buildings that are not otherwise protected by historic regulations.



## COMMUNITY WORKSHOP

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The community workshop held in October at Town Hall had the purpose of identifying the community's wishes, needs and aspirations for Bearskin Neck. Approximately 40 to 50 people attended the meeting, including residents, business owners, and town officials. The meeting started with a presentation of the key findings recorded and perceived as Bearskin Neck existing conditions, and led to a discussion of relevant issues, opportunities, and constraints.

The discussion was organized around three major categories: things that are valued by the community, things that should be preserved, and things that could be improved. The width and variety of comments helped creating a picture of the commitment and appreciation that residents and owners feel for the historic character and quality of living in the area. The meeting also served to point out the major issues of concern that need to be addressed through planning.

It became clear throughout the discussion that Bearskin Neck is widely recognized and cherished as a unique place to live, work, and visit because of its special qualities. However, some of these qualities could be improved to make it an even better place. Other qualities may be threatened, and even endangered by the prospects of future growth and development. The following are some of the key comments and opinions expressed at the meeting, organized by topic:

### THINGS THAT ARE VALUED

#### *DESIGN CHARACTER*

- Irregularity of building and street patterns, “shack” type of constructions
- Dense urban fabric generated by the close proximity of buildings to each other
- Human scale – small buildings that allow views of the sky
- Non-fenced in atmosphere
- Diversity of architecture

#### *STREETSCAPE*

- The trees that exist
- The pedestrian and design quality of public areas
- Wild and indigenous flowers

#### *HISTORIC CHARACTER*

- Unique historic character deriving from the Town's origins as fishing and shipping harbor
- A sense of history and a sense of ownership, based on what the Town has done



### *WATERFRONT*

- Views and access to the water from multiple directions
- The working harbor

### *LAND USE*

- Mixed use characterized by the presence of commercial and residential uses within the same district, and often the same building
- Availability of affordable housing

### *ACCESS AND CIRCULATION*

- Public access to the edge of the water and around many buildings
- The capacity to walk out to the breakwater

### *ECONOMIC ACTIVITIES*

- Bearskin Neck is a tourist destination, while Main Street serves local resident population



## THINGS THAT SHOULD BE PRESERVED

### *DESIGN CHARACTER*

- Variety and diversity of architecture
- Village density and human scale
- Uniqueness of old buildings



- Use of natural and traditional construction materials (cedar, granite)
- Motif #1
- Casual and informal atmosphere

### *STREETSCAPE*

- Incandescent lights (non-fluorescent lighting, no neon signs)
- Image, use of granite

### *HISTORIC CHARACTER*

- Knowledge-base of history, which is not necessarily always recorded

### *WATERFRONT*

- Clean waters
- Quietness (kayaks are fine, jet skis are not)
- The natural and environmental qualities of the beach
- The working harbor, and its capacity for fishing and transportation

### *LAND USE*

- Local ownership of houses and venues
- The presence of year-round population



### *ACCESS AND CIRCULATION*

- Public access to lands and water
- Public areas accessible to pedestrians
- Preserve as a walking environment and destination
- Public access and views for artists

### *ECONOMIC ACTIVITIES*

- Local businesses and businesses that serve locals

## **THINGS THAT COULD BE IMPROVED**

### *DESIGN CHARACTER*

- More use of granite (Cape Ann natural resource)
- Design review boards elected by the people
- Sign control and design quality



### *STREETSCAPE*

- Seasonal plantings and flowers
- Street lighting on Bearskin Beck
- More benches and places to sit
- Proliferation of overhead wires
- More trees and shade in the summer
- Informational kiosks, an informational booth

### *HISTORIC CHARACTER*

- Use of historic interpretive elements to enhance public areas

### *WATERFRONT*

- Organization and dredging of the harbor to increase number of moorings
- Community boating
- Rewriting of flood zones and tide banks determination
- Creation of a comprehensive noise by-law
- Management and control of scuba diving activities
- Evaluation of storm water drain in Old Harbor
- Promotion of ecological tourism and sightseeing (i.e. bird watching)

### *LAND USE*

- Ability to control balance of land uses
- More options for artist studio space
- Use and appearance of the Old Harbor



### *ACCESS AND CIRCULATION*

- The quality of the pedestrian environment
- Pedestrian/vehicle interference
- Access to Lumber Wharf and Middle Wharf
- Train station conditions, better service
- Consider creating a walking path to train station along pond's edge and cemetery

### *TRAFFIC AND PARKING*

- Traffic control (better ways to direct traffic than big Stop sign)
- Better parking management
- Buses park at Dock Square for long periods of time
- Motorcycle management
- Restriction of delivery hours
- Creation of a delivery center (for goods and supplies)

### *MAINTENANCE*

- Provision of trash containers
- More public restrooms, better maintained
- Provision of changing facilities for divers
- Enhanced recycling
- Better snow cleanup (private)

### *ECONOMIC ACTIVITIES*

- More cooperation between the existing Chambers of Commerce
- Creation of an all-inclusive visitor center
- Town and local support to businesses during “shoulder” seasons
- Consider establishing a cap or “ceiling” to gift shops
- Allow liquor service in restaurants



## KEY PLANNING ISSUES

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Listed in this section are the key planning issues that have been identified as affecting Bearskin Neck, based on the overview of existing conditions and the views of the community as expressed by the results of the workshop meeting. Some of the options and mechanisms available to resolve these issues are also indicated along the text. It is up to the Town and its residents to decide which options are more relevant and appropriate to pursue. In some cases, all of them may be applicable. Issues and options are arranged by topic following the order presented in the previous section of the report.

### *DESIGN CHARACTER*

*Issue: The village character of Bearskin Neck and the pedestrian quality of its roadways may be endangered by development pressures and increasing vehicular traffic.*

Options: Provisions to control the massing of new buildings and building additions are contained in the Town's Zoning By-Law. However, the effect of these regulations may sometimes be affected by the size and location of the parcel. If a parcel is larger than the surrounding properties, the resulting building may also likely be larger. In a dense and tightly knit area such as Bearskin Neck, large buildings may result in negative impacts in terms of causing massing imbalance, obstructing views and visibility, and casting shadows on adjacent properties. Larger developments also tend to produce more vehicle trips coming in and out of an area, which may result in negative impacts on roadway capacity, intersections, and the pedestrian environment.

Some of the options available to control building size, massing, traffic and parking are the following:

- Zoning overlay districts, which could include provisions in addition to the current zoning requirements that would be specifically aimed to address particular issues relevant to the area.



- Design guidelines aimed at preserving and supporting certain building qualities, such as massing, design, materials, landscaping, etc.
- Design review processes, to ensure that new improvements comply with all provisions and guidelines.
- Parking control measures, aimed at ensuring that only a certain number of vehicles are allowed to park in a particular area for specific periods of time.

## STREETSCAPE

*Issue: Streetscape quality is not consistent throughout Bearskin Neck; some areas are very attractive and well maintained, others detract from the overall image and appearance.*

Options: The Town and the Bearskin Neck community can work together to enhance the overall streetscape quality, which would benefit local residents and businesses by improving the overall quality of living. Streetscape improvements could also contribute to attract more residents and visitors to enjoy the amenities of the waterfront. Some of the choices and planning tools available are the following:



- Streetscape improvement plans, which set the basic planning and design directives for future improvements.
  - Design guidelines, aimed at achieving a consistent level of quality in the design of storefronts and front yards.
  - Cooperation between businesses and residents to purchase and maintain seasonal plantings
  - Voluntary participation in gardening and community service programs.
- Increased efforts by the Town and the community to keep public spaces clean and well maintained.

*Issue: The type, placement, and design quality of signs vary significantly throughout the area. This applies to commercial signs as well as traffic, directional and informational signage.*

Options: The Town could initiate steps to improve the aesthetic appeal and design quality of signs throughout the area. Some of the options to explore include the following:

- Signage guidelines that would seek consistency in sign types, appearance, materials, mounting, and lighting.
- Traffic and directional signs that are uniform and applied consistently throughout the area (similar size, placement, and mounting).
- Creative designs for informational signs and wayfinding.

*Issue: Overhead utilities and “cobra” type lights detract from the overall quality of the streetscape.*

Options: Removing overhead utilities is costly but it brings enormous benefits to the image and appearance of a village district. In the case of Bearskin Neck there may be additional costs involved as a consequence of being in a Flood Zone area. However, the Town may initiate studies to evaluate feasibility and potential sources of funding. Options include:



- Relocate utilities underground.
- Replace cobra lighting with pedestrian-scale light fixtures.

#### *HISTORIC CHARACTER*

*Issue: Bearskin Neck is largely unprotected against changes irresponsible of historic and contributing qualities.*

Options: The Town and the Rockport Historic District Commission could work together in assessing the potential to designate Bearskin Neck and Atlantic Avenue as a historic district celebrating the fishing and shipping legacy of the harbor. Part of the effort would include an inventory of the existing buildings and structures that are eligible for registration as part of a historic district, or would be considered as contributing to the overall historic character of the area. Options to assess and retain the value of those buildings include:

- Apply for eligibility to the National Register of Historic Places.
- Apply for eligibility to the Massachusetts Inventory of Historical and Archaeological Assets.
- Create a local historic district and local landmark list.



## WATERFRONT

*Issue: It is critical for the economic success of Bearskin Neck, and the economic balance of Rockport, that the Inner Harbor and the Old Harbor remain active as working harbors.*



Options: The Town should continue being proactive in supporting and promoting water-dependent uses on the Old and Inner Harbors, especially uses that support fishing, shipping, and boating. One key option in planning for the best use of the harbor areas would be a Municipal Harbor Plan (MHP). Many communities in Massachusetts have used MHPs as planning and economic development tools to define land use, goals and objectives, design standards, and the types of activities that are supported, encouraged or prohibited within their limits.

*Issue: State regulations that apply to coastal areas (Chapter 91) ask for the preservation of public access along the water, but do not necessarily regulate the design quality and treatment of those public areas.*

Options: The Town needs to work through zoning and the permitting process to ensure that the results of new development are consistent with the community's design vision for the harbor and the waterfront. In addition to the current Zoning By-Law, which includes the Coastal Flood Plain District and Site Plan Review sections, the Town could implement the following mechanisms:

- A Municipal Harbor Plan, which would define types of uses allowed, location and character of public open space areas, and design standards that apply to different types of uses.
- A Zoning Overlay District especially created to control development on Bearskin Neck.

*Issue: The location of Bearskin Neck in a 100-year Flood Zone V2 area has an impact on the use, design and construction requirements of buildings at the ground floor level, and their level of protection under Federal Insurance regulations.*

Options: As well as in regards to the issues above, the Town could attempt to work with State authorities in creating a Municipal Harbor Plan that would include special provisions regarding flooding and historic conditions, within reasonable limitations.

## ACCESS AND CIRCULATION

*Issue: Heavy vehicular traffic during the tourist season poses pedestrian and environmental hazards along Bearskin Neck Road, and spills over into residential areas.*

Options: The Town could strengthen measures to control traffic access and reduce congestion on Bearskin Neck at peak times during the season. Some of the potential measures that have been implemented in other places include the following:

- Restrict vehicular access on some roads to residents and commercial deliveries only during certain times of the day.
- Restrict parking on Bearskin Neck to residents and commercial deliveries only, by issuing and enforcing special parking permits.
- Restrict visitor parking at the breakwater to short periods of time by only allowing vehicles with handicapped plates (up to 30 minutes) and just a few spaces for other vehicles (up to 15 minutes).
- Encourage parking at alternative locations, and walking.

#### *ECONOMIC ACTIVITIES*

*Issue: Type, quality, and variety of retail on Bearskin Neck have not been consistent. The number of art galleries and restaurants has been decreasing, while the number of souvenir shops keeps increasing.*

Options: The Town and the business community could work together to market Bearskin Neck as a prime location for quality shops, cafes and restaurants that would draw customers from the Gloucester and Cape Ann market area. Some of the opportunities available include:

- Work with the existing businesses and property owners to improve the quality and maintenance of buildings, storefronts, and outdoor areas.
- Work with the local Chambers of Commerce to promote Bearskin Neck as a prime location for quality restaurants, specialty shopping, and art galleries.
- Promote water recreational activities for residents and visitors, such as harbor cruises, boating, canoeing, kayaking, sailing, etc.
- Seek funding opportunities to expand and enhance public services, such as a visitor information center, public restrooms, changing facilities at the beach, etc.





*Issue: A significant number of shop owners do not live in Rockport year round. Many stores operate only during the summer, which results in a substantial decrease of activities and amenities during the winter.*

Options: The Town could work with local owners and residents to promote a consistent level of amenities year round. One way to achieve this would be establishing a Business Association or another type of local organization representing groups and individuals committed to advancing the goals and best interests of the Bearskin Neck community. Parts of the role of this organization could include the following:

- Promote and attract quality businesses.
- Maintain the lines of communication open between members of the community.
- Promote art and cultural activities throughout the year.



## RECOMMENDATIONS

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The following recommendations are mainly aimed at supplementing the existing regulations that allow the Town of Rockport to control growth and new development. The existing regulatory framework consists primarily of Zoning By-Laws, State Waterways Regulations (Chapter 91), and the Massachusetts Building Code. The proposed additional mechanisms can be adapted and specifically tailored to respond to the particular characteristics and conditions of Bearskin Neck, allowing the Town of Rockport to have a better control of change over time. This in turn will allow the Town to better protect and enhance the existing village character. The proposed recommendations are the following:

- Create a special **Zoning Overlay District** to protect the special character of Bearskin Neck, and review current zoning for the rest of the downtown.
- Include site and building **Design Guidelines and Standards** as part of new zoning requirements, to guide the design of new buildings and renovations.
- Establish a **Design Review Process** as a prerequisite for zoning and building approval under the new overlay district.
- Initiate the process of preparing a **Municipal Harbor Plan** (MHP), which would enable the Town to define allowed uses and activities, economic goals and design standards for new development.
- Seek funding to prepare a **Streetscape Improvement Plan**, setting the basic planning and design directives for future improvements.
- Initiate steps to inventory historic resources and create a **Bearskin Neck Historic District** that will protect the historic and contributing qualities of the village fabric.
- Establish a **Building Improvement Program** to provide financial and technical assistance to businesses and property owners.
- Strengthen **Traffic and Parking Control Measures** by enforcing parking permit requirements.
- Create a **Visitors Center**, and keep up the maintenance of public services and facilities.
- Work in conjunction with local owners, businesses and residents to support a local **Business Association**.

### *ZONING OVERLAY DISTRICT*

The existing General District zoning is a flexible tool that allows for the development of a variety of commercial and residential uses. However, all of its requirements may not be adequate for a dense and small-scale village fabric, such as the one that characterizes Bearskin Neck and downtown Rockport. Some of the uses currently allowed by Special Permit in the General District include apartment buildings, funeral homes, transportation centers, research laboratories, wholesale business, etc., which would be inappropriate on Bearskin Neck and most of the downtown area. These types of uses would likely result in large buildings, extensive areas of parking, and heavy vehicular traffic.

Current zoning for Bearskin Neck and the rest of the downtown should be reviewed and updated in order to protect and enhance their village character and scale. Aspects that need to be reconsidered include the types of uses allowed, setback requirements and parking ratios. This could be accomplished by rezoning the downtown and creating a special zoning overlay district for Bearskin Neck.

A **Zoning Overlay District** would allow for special provisions to address and protect Bearskin Neck's particular character in addition to the underlying zoning, which would still apply for all other basic requirements not covered by the overlay provisions. Overlay districts are sometimes used to include design guidelines and standards specific to a certain area, or to protect the character of buildings that may not be eligible for inclusion in a historic register but nevertheless have architectural value worth preserving. The Boston Zoning Code has examples of overlay districts created to preserve the architectural and design qualities of its

buildings, such as Neighborhood Design Districts and Restricted Roof Structure Districts. A design review process is often a requirement for approval of any new development or renovation within these districts.



Overlay districts can also be established to protect natural conditions and environmental assets such as aquifers, wetlands, and ecosystems. Examples of these types of overlays in the Town of Rockport's Zoning By-Law include the Watershed Protection Overlay District and the Coastal Flood Plain District, which applies to the study area.

Some of the zoning provisions that should be revised in order to become part of the new overlay district include:

- The list of allowed uses, in order to preclude any use that would require large site areas, extensive parking or large buildings. *In particular, none of the uses that currently require a Special Permit within the current Semi-Residential and General Districts should be allowed on Bearskin Neck.*

- Parking requirements, in order to reduce the amount of parking allowed on Bearskin Neck to the minimum possible levels. *As part of the overlay district, the Town may want to consider waiving parking requirements in exchange for compliance with a Parking Plan, which would set parking limits and allowances by use and owner depending on the availability of on-site and public parking spaces.*
- Building setbacks and dimensional requirements, in order to maintain the consistent density of the village fabric and preclude new development larger than the surrounding buildings. *In particular, General District requirements of minimum lot area and frontage should be waived; front setback requirements should be consistent with the alignment of the adjacent facades.*

The new zoning overlay district could include requirements for architectural and site **Design Guidelines and Standards**, which would serve to guide the design of new buildings, additions, renovations, and other improvements to the existing properties. Standards could define the treatment of building facades, entrances, windows and rooftops; materials and colors; the way buildings meet the ground and, in some cases, the water. Design standards could also set parameters to define the layout and landscaping of exterior spaces, access and parking.

A **Design Review Process** based on compliance of the proposed building or improvements with the required design guidelines and standards should be established as a prerequisite for zoning and building approval under the new overlay district requirements. Design review and approval could be carried out by members of the Planning Board, members of a special committee selected by Town officials, or any other relevant organization or agency selected by the Town for this purpose.

#### *MUNICIPAL HARBOR PLAN*

The Massachusetts Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) has been vested by the Commonwealth with the general care of its harbors, tidewaters and tidelands, a function that



DEP performs through Chapter 91 licenses and Waterways Regulations. DEP recognizes that each harbor within the Commonwealth is unique, and it has established a voluntary procedure by which cities and towns may obtain approval of municipal harbor plans from the Secretary of Environmental Affairs. A **Municipal Harbor Plan (MHP)** allows a municipality to develop long-term, comprehensive plans for its harbor that are consistent with State waterways regulations. It also allows some latitude in developing plans that are tailored to the characteristics of the particular harbor and the planning

goals of the community. For example, a town may propose modifications to use, height, setback and open space limitations set by the Waterways Regulations in exchange for substitute requirements as long as it can be demonstrated that these are consistent with the policy goals and objectives of the regulations.

In this particular case, a MHP which would enable the Town to accomplish the following goals, among others:

- Protect the capacity of the harbor to support water-dependent uses, and define the types and character of supporting uses that should be allowed in the harbor area.
- Guide the design and construction of new development in the harbor area by establishing site-specific design criteria and standards to protect existing environmental qualities, and mitigate potential impacts.
- Set the Town's own standards and requirements for the location and treatment of open spaces, and the preservation of public access along the water.



#### *STREETSCAPE IMPROVEMENT PLAN*

The Town could initiate the process of enhancing public and open spaces at Bearskin Neck by preparing a **Streetscape Improvement Plan**, which could address the following issues among others:

- Improve Dock Square by reducing the amount of asphalt pavement, increasing landscaping, and providing more pedestrian amenities (e.g. using special



pavement patterns and materials in areas traveled by pedestrians, including areas reserved as fire lanes; trimming the lower branches of the central tree to create space for a sitting area underneath; providing benches for people to sit down while they wait for buses; providing informational signage, etc.)

- Provide traffic calming elements along Bearskin Neck Road and residential roads, such as areas with different pavement texture or elevation, road markers or bollards at key intersections, and signage requiring drivers to slow down.



- Improve existing sidewalks where applicable (e.g. Dock Square) by widening the sidewalks if the walking section is less than 6-foot wide, providing handicapped access ramps, pedestrian lighting, and street trees.
- Replace the existing cobra lights with 12-14 foot height cut-off light fixtures in the white light spectrum, to improve the quality of lighting at the pedestrian level; light fixtures could be selected from traditional period styles to emphasize historic qualities, or from contemporary designs and marine motifs that would be appropriate to a seacoast town.
- Relocate overhead utilities underground.
- Provide clusters of street trees at selected locations.
- Provide benches, trash receptacles, and bike racks at selected locations along pedestrian routes and lookout areas.
- Consider funding mechanisms and design options to locate seasonal planters.
- Use outdoor interpretive elements and displays to convey the history of the area



### *HISTORIC DISTRICT*

The creation of a **Bearskin Neck Historic District** would contribute to protect the historic and contributing qualities of the village fabric, and promoting the use of traditional construction methods and materials. The district could also serve to preserve and communicate the history of the Old Harbor and Inner Harbor, and the significance of Bearskin Neck as a key component of the economic and historic life of the Town. Physical boundaries could possibly extend to include Atlantic Avenue on the eastern side of the harbor. This could be a local historic district,

in which any proposed demolition or changes to designated buildings would have to apply to the Historic District and Landmarks Commission for approval. The local historic designation could also include enforceable provisions to guide owners, tenants and contractors through the historic rehabilitation effort.

### *BUILDING IMPROVEMENT PROGRAMS*

In the case of a special district with a particular character, such as Bearskin Neck, the design character of the village depends significantly on the quality and good condition of its buildings. Some of the buildings today display signs of lack of maintenance and disrepair. The Town could seek financial assistance from State grant programs and local banks to create a **Building Improvement Program** that would provide financial and technical assistance to businesses and local owners for improving their properties. Assistance could include loans for building facade and exterior repairs, storefront renovation, and signage improvements, including technical advice regarding design, materials and construction.



### *TRAFFIC AND PARKING CONTROLS*

An important measure to reduce the amount of traffic on Bearskin Neck Road and potential hazards to pedestrians would be to strengthen **Traffic and Parking Control Measures** by enforcing parking permit requirements, reducing the number of spaces and time allowed for public parking at the end of Bearskin Neck Road, and directing visitors and buses to park at designated alternative locations. The Town could initiate studies to assess and set time limits for bus parking that are reasonable in terms of allowing sufficient time for passenger drop off and pick up, but require buses to park at a remote location while their passengers visit the area.



### *OUTREACH AND PROMOTION*

The Town should work in conjunction with the local Chambers of Commerce and business owners to create and staff a **Visitors Information Center**. Some of its basic functions could be to welcome and guide tourists, promote local attractions and amenities, and provide access to public services and facilities such as restrooms, phone booths, public parking areas, etc.

The Town should work together with members of the community to support the creation of a local **Business Association**, Bearskin Neck neighborhood committee, or a similar type of volunteer organization. This type of organizations are critical in overseeing and steering change to the extent that they incorporate local owners, businesses and residents dedicated to advancing the goals and the planning vision of the community. Plans are successful to the extent that they elicit a positive response and commitment from people, particularly people from different traits and sectors of the community who are represented in the process and closely collaborate to achieve common goals, visions and aspirations.



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